A Woman of Faith & Foresight

Cheryl Ryan

Mother Hugh lived in Albury for only 20 years but her contribution and influence was immense.

She was born Ina Berrell in 1898, one of six children of Hugh and Mary Jane Berrell of Thalaba, near Crookwell, NSW. In 1919 she entered the Goulburn Sisters of Mercy and was professed in 1921 as Sister Hugh. After teaching for two years, she changed to nursing training at the Mater Hospital in North Sydney graduating with three nursing certificates.

She was appointed Matron of the Sacred Heart Hospital Young where she worked for twenty years. In 1945, with a small group of Sisters of Mercy she helped establish Albury's Mercy Hospital in the former Chelvey Private Hospital, Olive Street Albury.

Plans were soon underway for a larger hospital on fourteen acres, Poole's Hill, Kiewa St. A foundation stone was laid in 1946. A committee was formed under chairman Reg Ryan then after his death, Alf Duffy. With strong support from local town and farming communities, fundraising events included the Mercy Hospital Queen competitions, Mercy Hospital Invitation Stakes and the Mercy Fete.

The Argus reported in November 1953 that Mother Hugh planned to include many features seen in other hospitals that she visited.

A view from Kiewa street of the Mercy Hospital in 1962

The new Mercy Hospital was officially opened on December 1, 1957 by Cardinal Gilroy. With my parents, I attended the event and recall the sense of pride and excitement shared by the crowd at the opening.

The following year, Mother Hugh was honoured with the award of Member of the British Empire (MBE) for services to the community.

Many older people remember the nursing skills of Mother Hugh and her fellow Sisters and their support for families. As well as her abundant energy and commitment to the project, her first priority was always her patients. She was recognised as one of Albury's most influential people, described by the *Border Morning Mail* in 2000 as a "woman of faith and foresight."

The work of Mother Hugh and the Sisters reflected the post-war diversity of the Albury population. Frank Le Compte, a Belgian painter who came to Albury via Bonegilla migrant camp, painted her portrait in gratitude for "being a friend to everybody." He presented it to the Mercy Order after her death.

Mother Hugh died in Sydney at the Mater Hospital in September 1966. She was given a large funeral in Albury, the cortege to St John's Cemetery Thurgoona reported to be three miles long.